

Testimony to Montgomery County Council Budget Hearing, February 7, 2023

My name is Robert Pestronk. I live at [REDACTED]

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding upcoming capital budget decisions by Council.

I focus my comments on the Urban Parks Element which could, unfortunately, support the design and construction of a dog park in Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park in this year or future years. In total, this expenditure could exceed one million dollars.

I am aware of the 2019 study which argued a need for additional dog parks in Montgomery County. Perhaps the pandemic increased the number of households with dogs. But I believe there are alternate, convenient sites where dogs currently exercise and find relief in the Friendship Heights, Somerset, and bordering DC neighborhoods. A dog park could be located there if, in fact, one is needed. A section of the Park, currently rented rare green, treed space part of a larger well-used neighborhood park where leashed dogs are currently welcome, should be repurposed instead to continue to generate revenue, preserve a home with considerable history, and add other amenities. Neighbors have suggested a “mini-park” accessible to those with physical challenges, a bike rack, tables, paths, all surrounding an urban garden to enhance the park experience.

As examples of alternate sites, Parks and Planning could work with developers and owners of private property in Montgomery County and DC along the Western and Wisconsin Avenue corridors, areas now planned for increased housing density and potential property swaps. Planning and Parks’ experimentation with the narrowing corridor along Little Falls Parkway presents another practical alternative.

Budgets are decisions of both policy and funding. With respect to policy, first, I ask the Council to amend the Urban Parks Element policy language which currently enables Parks and Planning at their sole discretion to site and construct dog parks. Any other animal-related facility in Montgomery County requires very different steps for approval. Last year alone, Urban Elements dog park language and process resulted in three instances of unnecessary controversy. The swift shift in attention from Norwood to Willard Park last year was one of those. I am pleased that Parks and Planning has taken a step back from their former rapid timeframe for construction of a dog park in Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park to ultimately reject any further plans for such a facility there.

Second, regarding funding, I ask the Council to reduce the proposed and remaining amounts in the Urban Parks Element line items so as to make it impossible for Parks and Planning to construct a dog park or another noisome facility with this funding source. The amounts should instead be restricted to some of the less expensive, less intrusive uses also defined in the capital budget document.

I believe the Council will receive additional testimony during the hearings of January 7 and 9 concerning the potential, and unfortunate, idea for a dog park in Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park and the way it was proposed and marketed. I’m also willing to provide background information in support of my testimony or to meet with members of the Council at another time. Thank you for your consideration of my requests.